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Final Report

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Caregiver Information Search Behavior for Alternative Transportation

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Project Description

Numerous factors contribute to cessation of driving, ranging from a decline in cognitive capability to a decrease in overall physical health. When driving cessation occurs, responsibility often falls on adult child caregivers to extend the personal mobility of their parents deeper into old age. While not the end-all solution, alternative transportation can alleviate some of the pressure placed on family and friends in transporting the driving disadvantaged to essential destinations such as a grocery store or pharmacy, as well as 'nonessential' social destinations that have been shown to improve the mental health of the elderly. Today's caregiver has a more robust toolset at their disposal than their predecessors in the search for information on alternative transportation. However, while information available on the Internet can be rich, relevant and instructive, finding it is not as simple as googleing a few key words and declaring 'mission accomplished.' The family caregiver must reconcile this information with the context and specific demands of their loved one. This project focused on understanding the means through which different types of caregivers find information on alternative transportation, and aimed to develop a cohesive framework to demonstrate the process a caregiver undertook in obtaining information.

Method

A literature review was conducted to identify research that could be linked to the information seeking process—not necessarily specific to transportation or aging but the information seeking process in general. The literature revealed the anticipated rational approach to information seeking; that is, framing of a problem and then seeking information on the web; however, another model was also identified. Information seeking is described as being similar to a hunter or predatory animal. The information seeker is an infovore. Biological metaphors are used to understand how web users hunt, detect the scent of useful information and then, like a predator, capture useful information. This model assumed considerable motivation and skill at information seeking.

An online convenience survey was conducted to better understand the range of potential attitudes and behaviors of adult children who assume a caregiver role in seeking avenues to help maintain mobility for their parent. While online surveys may affect the findings by introducing selection bias, recent studies show an overwhelming number of adults older but online.

Findings

Findings revealed that simply providing information online may not be an altogether effective approach to ensuring that adequate transportation resources are available to caregivers and their family members. The convenience survey results suggested that people do frame their family member's transportation needs in terms of the type of trips necessary, e.g., medical or food shopping; however, in selecting information about

available alternatives, they are most likely to approximate how similar alternatives are most like the car ride they might provide themselves. Moreover, caregivers were most likely to identify possible alternatives online and then validate them with friends or other family members as to their reliability, comfort, safety, etc. The survey results indicated that the most trusted and sought after information was from those of friends and family, followed by personal experience, and then information distributed by alternative transportation providers.

Conclusions

This study revealed that objective information such as cost, schedule and routing were important factors that caregivers considered in identifying transportation for their loved ones; however, both the literature review and the exploratory survey revealed other insights that might be useful to alternative transportation providers. These include:

- Information seeking may begin with an online search; however, initial guidance may be from a friend or family member. Information about a given alternative is sought and then perhaps validated with an informal conversation with a friend/family member who has used the alternative.
- Online comments about alternatives are perceived as being valued considerations in identifying alternatives.
- Most trusted filter is the personal experience of the caregiver in determining the comfort, convenience and safety of an alternative; therefore, every rider today is either a caregiver, a future caregiver or trusted source of information to a caregiver evaluating transportation alternatives.
- Bus and light rail are not readily seen as an adequate alternative to the car or riding with a family member in an automobile.

Outputs

Results of this work were presented at:

- AARP, Washington, DC
- The Hartford Advance 50 Gerontology Group
- Transportation Research Board, Advisory Committee on Older Persons Mobility & Safety
- Draft paper outlining methods, findings and results is being prepared.